



In the Heartland of the Taliban

KHELMAND PROVINCE, Afghanistan ñ In July 1880, a British brigade under the command of General G. R. S. Burrows was forced to withdraw from Gereshk towards Kandahar with the approach of a large Afghan force from Herat led by Ayub Kahn, son of Amir Sher Ali, the deposed ruler of Afghanistan. A few days later, the British suffered their worst defeat in the Second Anglo-Afghan War near the village of Maiwand.

One hundred fifteen years later, mujahadeen fighters led by Ismael Khan were ambushed and decisively defeated at Gereshk, setting in motion the fall of Shindand, Herat, and western Afghanistan to the Taliban. The formerly prosperous village of Gereshk is situated along the Helmand River approximately 75 miles west-northwest of Kandahar.

Water supplied through the ancient Boghra irrigation canal, which was reconstructed and expanded in the early 1950s by the American engineering firm of Morrison-Knudsen Afghanistan, Inc., has made this area a center of agricultural production. It is also a center of support for the Taliban. More than three years after the ouster of the government headed by Mullah Omar, drugs and money from the region are still finding their way to the dissidents. Members of 3rd Special Forces Group, along with Afghan National Army soldiers mentored by Combined Joint Task Force Phoenix ETTs, are working hard to curtail this support. Capt. Robert Pawlak, a



State Command Sgt. Maj. Phillip D. Gearlds (left), from the Kentucky National Guard, presents his coin to Sgt. Henry West, from Lexington, during a Thanksgiving Day visit to Gereshk.

Photo by Lt. Col. Gregory Moore
Combined Joint Task Force Phoenix PAO

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Afghan National Army soldiers stationed at Gereshk conducting MOUT training.

Photo by Lt. Col. Gregory Moore
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member of the Special Forces operational detachment located at Camp Price, explained that the anti-coalition militia and criminals in the province are a difficult group to pin down. "We spend a lot of time on patrols in the hills and mountains, but this is very rugged terrain." That challenge, however, has not deterred the American-Afghan team from aggressively pursuing the Taliban and their supporters.

Master Sgt. Michael Voss, an AGR member of the Virginia National Guard, has been at Camp Price with his ANA company since September. He has used his 25 years of military experience, which includes several deployments with the 10th Mountain Division, to help polish the skills of his team. "We have a good mix of young and old soldiers in our company," said Voss. "While communications can be a problem some times, we are starting to achieve a seamless operation." He also noted that the ANA soldiers are "brave fighters." "I trust them with my life." The Beaver Dam, Va., resident misses his wife and two sons, but knows that the work he is doing here will make a difference in their comfort and safety back home.

Sgt. Henry West, who hails from Lexington, Ky., works with Voss at Camp Price. Prior to his mobilization, he was a student at Sullivan University in Lexington. West is also impressed with the courage of the ANA soldiers. They have been on numerous patrols and an air assault mission where they have come under fire. "These are good men, good soldiers," said West. "It is really satisfying to watch the ANA become better organized."

While there is still work to be done, the American and Afghan troops are confident they will succeed in making Gereshk and the surrounding countryside once again safe and prosperous for the people of Afghanistan.

Story by U. S. Army Lt. Col. Gregory Moore, Combined Joint Task Force Phoenix PAO

Recycling Mullah Omar's Ghecko Compound

KANDAHAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan — In stark contrast to the simple life that he professed to live, Amir Mullah Modammed Omar, leader of the Taliban, allowed himself to be housed in grand style by one of his most ardent supporters, Osama bin Laden.

On the outskirts of Kandahar, beneath the shadows of Gheebur Rhahal, also known as Ghecko Mountain, Omar resided in a state-of-the-art, fortified complex built with bin Laden's money. It included a large swimming pool, air-conditioning, indoor plumbing and a barn for his cows that included an electric ceiling fan and individual water spigots. Few other citizens of Afghanistan had access to such luxury. Because he seldom

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Recycling Mullah Omar's Ghecko Compound



The Gheebur Rhahl, also known as Gheeko Mountain, towers over the landing zone near the former compound of Mullah Omar in Gheeko.

Photo by Lt. Col. Gregory Moore
Combined Joint Task Force Phoenix PAO

left Kandahar, most of the business of the Taliban government was conducted from the complex. One of the more fabulous stories relates how Omar kept the istate treasury under his bed in several chests. When funds were needed for operation of the government, or simply to assist a destitute individual, he simply pulled a box out and withdrew the necessary cash. Members of a U. S. Delta Force unit captured the compound as Omar and his supporters fled from Kandahar in late 2001. Shortly after, Hamid Karzai took up residence along with a detachment of Special Forces troops.

Today, Camp Gheeko serves as a center of activity in an area heavily populated by Taliban supporters. Cpt. Jerry Bradley, a member of 3rd Special Forces Group working out of the former Taliban compound, cautioned there is still an insurgency here. But he also quickly added that the CJTF Phoenix ETTs and their Afghan National Army Soldiers co-located at Camp Gheeko make it possible for the Special Forces operational detachment to take the fight to anti-coalition forces. We are starting to see encouraging progress in ANA NCO development, he said. They have successfully planned movements and sustained two companies in the field during recent operations with the detachment.

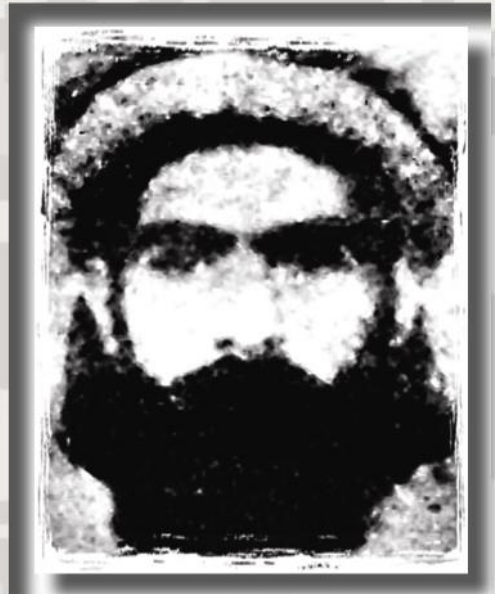
Sgt. First Class Alexander Maloney, from Lexington, Ky., is excited about the opportunity to work with Special Forces as he mentors his ANA charges. And he likewise sees the progress that is being made in developing the noncommissioned officers in his company. They are more professional than I expected, he said, and have shown great dedication in learning how to be leaders. It seems a nice twist of fate that Soldiers of the new Afghan National Army are learning their trade working out of Mullah Omar's opulent complex at Gheeko.

Story by U. S. Army Lt. Col. Gregory Moore, Combined Joint Task Force Phoenix PAO



Mullah Omar

Amir Mullah Modhammed Omar, the enigmatic leader of the Taliban movement, remains a mystery to the world despite the fact that for five years he led a nation of nearly 30 million people. He was born to peasant parents from the Hotak tribe of Ghilzai Pashtuns sometime in 1959, and grew up in Tarin Kowt during the Soviet war. As a young man, he assumed the responsibility of caring for his mother and extended family when his father died. Omar later moved to Singesar village in the Mewand district of Kandahar Province where he became the village mullah and opened a small madrassa. It is believed that he joined the Hizb-e-Islami faction of mujahadeen to fight against the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime in 1989. He had a reputation as a fierce commander and was reportedly wounded four times, the most serious resulting in the loss of an eye. According to legend, he started the Taliban movement after the Islamic prophet Muhammad appeared to him in a dream. Known for his piety and pure devotion to Islam, Omar assumed the significant title of Amir al-Mu'minin, or commander of the faithful, in 1996. When the Taliban were in power, he rarely left that large house in Ghecko that was reportedly built for him by Osama bin Laden. Foreign Minister Wail Ahmad Mutawakkil served as his spokesman. Omar has been on the run since forces backed by the United States ousted the Taliban regime in 2002.



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